Thursday, 15 November 2012 09:58

Dan O'Hara on Ballard, Cyberpositive, and the skeuomorph

Dan O'Hara's interests are both varied and, certainly for us, profound. Part of the O(rphan)d(rift>) collective that released the seminal Cyberpositive *in 1995 ("... probably the first Deleuzean technotheory novel"), O'Hara has gone on to extensively study and write about a number of key themes within socio-technological discourse.*

Dan O'Hara - photo courtesy Luke Robert Mason

15 years after the publication of Cyberpositive*, we invited Dan to talk about the intervening period, as well as focus on a range of interests including skeuomorphism and the life and works of J.G. Ballard.*

Why now for a re-issue of *Cyberpositive*, do you think?

I had nothing to do with its re-issue. In fact, no-one from 0(rphan)d(rift>) did. It was a surprise for everyone. But I think the re-issue now, in 2012, makes more than poetic sense. Martin McGeown, the owner of the Cabinet Gallery and the original publisher, was responsible for the republication; he said he wanted to *"publish it in the year it was originally set"* and that *"the decision to republish the book was carried out quite quickly, whilst the movement towards this had been gradual. In part I feel it is to acknowledge a legacy, a history, but also the enduring relevance of the work (its increasing relevance in the light of recent developments)."*

The book begins with a sort of prologue:

"we are in virtual time now.

2012"

0(rphan)d(rift>) saw 2012 as the year in which a number of critical historical phase-changes would arrive – but then the book's a collective expression of a number of different viewpoints. For Nick Land, 2012 would be the onset of the next K-wave winter, the Kondriatev socioeconomic supercycle that suggested both a deep cyclical global recession and an end to the current post-industrial phase of technological innovation. Nick thought this would manifest itself in a global shift of power from West to East, and would come about through the

hyperacceleration of zombie capitalism, which he welcomed as the only possible solution to capitalism's chaotic inequities – and it does seem now as though capitalism is gorging itself to the point of economic bulimia. For Maggie Roberts, the driving force behind 0(rphan)d(rift>), 2012 had the additional significance of an eschatological endpoint in Mayan history, the mystical "timewave zero" that accorded with the singularity identified in Terence McKenna's interpretation of the *I Ching*; and that, at the same time, accorded with Nick Land's entirely rationalist analysis of economic supercycles.

The actual date 2012 never had the same socioeconomic or mystical significance for me, though needless to say, it looks like I was wrong to discount it. Maybe economic power hasn't shifted to the Pacific Rim alone, but it's certainly moving away from Europe and the USA towards some of the BRIC countries. In the meanwhile, Nick's notion of *"compression thresholds normed to an intensive logistic curve: 1500, 1756, 1948, 1980, 1996, 2004, 20~, 2010, 2011, ..."*, seems rather more compelling now than it did in 1995, despite the binary-countdown contrivance. The last three years have seen an ever-increasing number of micro flash-crashes caused by HFT (High Frequency Trading) algorithms to the point where, over the last few months, they're happening almost every day. If the ecology of market trading is shifting from a human-to-human system supported by machines, to a solely machine-to-machine system in which trading happens at a speed far faster than human reaction times – and that's exactly what's happened, this year, in 2012 - then *Cyberpositive*'s vision of sudden economic meltdown caused by the hyperacceleration of machinic desire isn't so far off the mark. *"Nothing human makes it out of the near future"*, indeed.

But I'd guess that such things weren't in Martin McGeown's mind when he speaks of *"recent developments"*. With him, I'd stress instead the way in which *Cyberpositive* seems to have anticipated the current aesthetic so completely – in that sense, the book now has a readership that's ready for it; it's no longer avant-garde, but timely.

What has happened to the smart-drugs rave/ecstasy/LSD-supported view of a technoutopia, as espoused by this canon of work (*Cyberia* et al)? Are we in it? Was it crushed by pragmatic realities? Something else?

I don't think this technoutopian view ever existed as anything but a fantasy in the minds of a few ultra-wealthy Californians lusting after transcendent cybersex and immortality through mind-uploading. Everyone else reading cyberpunk novels in the '90s knew the difference between fact and fiction, even if they were reading on E or acid. Douglas Rushkoff's book *Cyberia* documents a technopositivism that's very much part of the Californian Ideology, as Andy Cameron and Richard Barbrook named it; and the hedonistic positivism would still have been there without Silicon Valley.

What that brief explosion of drug use *did* do (accompanied by an increasing acceptance of mechanical music in the form of techno, and abstract art in the form of computer-generated visuals and laser-displays) was to naturalize the avant-garde and the non-representational, hence making it possible for people's imaginations to become technoutopian, and in doing so, it took a degree of caution away from that generation's attitude towards technology. The subsequent generation has completely accepted drugs as personality augmentation or mood modification technologies, even if it perhaps hasn't yet realized that some technologies can also function as drugs: as Mark Fisher puts it, one can see mobile phones as *"electro-libidinal parasites"* that hugely increase machine-to-machine communication without necessarily increasing human-to-human communication. In the neurotic communications landscape that's evolved since the early nineties, we humans are the real drones.

Charles Platt, who wrote the 1991 cyberpunk classic *The Silicon Man* – a novel in which minds can be uploaded to a virtual world to become what he called 'infomorphs', but only at the cost of the permanent death of the 'biomorph' or human body – was so committed to the technoutopian vision that his subsequent career throughout the 1990s and 2000s was working with a succession of companies actively pursuing cryogenic freezing. But the rest of the cyberpunk canon is much less positive, emphasizing instead social inequality, overproduction and waste, the loss of human sovereignty in both material and perceptual realms.

Cyberpositive sits somewhere inbetween these two extremes. The book's mantra, *"Change for the machines, because they aren't going to change for you",* is neither utopian nor dystopian; it's a rational piece of good advice translated for the technological age from the *I Ching*.

That was also a period where the words "Virtual" and "Cyber" were used extensively, both in theory and practice. Are these words still relevant and how has their meaning changed?

'Virtual' is still used, and useful, especially when used to distinguish the invisible world of genetic forces and tendencies from the visible world of the actual, as Deleuze uses it. And it was in the combination of this philosophical sense and the vernacular sense of 'almost but not quite' that the word was useful in the 1990s – the term 'Virtual Reality' made a whole generation of people who were completely sceptical about computers and this new Internet thing take it slightly more seriously, and realize that it might have real effects on their lives.

But the difference is that the virtual, in the philosophical sense, is not a simulation of the actual - the virtual and the actual combine to make reality – whereas in common usage, the philosophical and vernacular meanings merged to produce a new sense, referring to a copy or an emulation of the actual, as with so-called 'virtual machines' like Parallels, or 'virtual offices'. I think that usage is already decaying into something closer its previous meaning of 'almost, but not quite'.

'Cyber' is still in common usage too but, as Luke Robert Mason points out, mostly only in the military, security, and porn industries. That's a much more interesting linguistic development! Warfare, crime, and sex, all perceived as so closely related that they share a now-obsolete and now-sinister prefix... indeed, the mere presence of the cyber- prefix serves as a linguistic marker to indicate real-world social unacceptability. Interesting that a word which originally connotes control over a situation – as in cybernetics – has come to be used as an accent for any socially undesirable situation over which we do *not* have control – such as terrorism, or bullying. In that sense, the word has become a linguistic skeuomorph, its functional meaning inverted as it became used in the new context of net culture.

Virtual, cyber, and skeuomorph – all three words are interesting culturally, in that they've become so misused over such a very brief period. Almost everything that is popularly described as 'virtual' is properly a part of the actual; almost nothing that is nowadays prefixed with 'cyber' is controllable via feedback; and 99% of press and blog articles about 'skeuomorphs' are in fact about human-designed representations. This last one is clearly the one that interests me most at present: in its proper sense, it's a useful concept in archaeology and potentially in other fields too, but not a word that would ever have come into popular usage pre-internet. The net makes all sorts of obscurities available for repurposing, though, and technical terms are no exception; so we see 'skeuomorph' employed mainly to refer to the design of GUIs that imitate and represent the appearance of a real object. That distortion of the term is a symptom of the tendency of the net not to raise the general level of education, but to reduce the complex to the lowest common denominator – a pity, because a concept that could be used to understand the true drivers of novelty is instead being misappropriated, its meaning completely inverted, as a term for designers to insult each other with.

If the New Aesthetic is something of a new label for an old bottle, why did it suddenly become so popular? Why did certain corners of the media, thinkers and commentators latch onto it? Is such a theory temporal, even interim, anyway?

Well, it's a rather grand label, isn't it? Quite provocative and ambitious, as a name for what James Bridle subsequently insists isn't a movement. There's the traditional art manifesto gambit of trumpeting the 'New', as if we're all drowning in old, stuffy, cobwebbed art which needs sweeping away by something bright and shiny and challenging and urgent. And then there's this complex and dignified word 'Aesthetic', which flatters what's being described with a coherent philosophy and entices commentators to discuss it as though it had such.

So the name certainly helped it to attention. After all, it can't have much to do with the content, which is very 1990s, exploring exactly the same themes and using exactly the same kind of imagery that (quite independently) both 0(rphan)d(rift>) and François Roche did in 1994, or that one can read about in Scott Bukatman's 1993 book *Terminal Identity*, or that one can explore by looking at Mute magazine's art coverage from 1994 onwards.

And then the New Aesthetic is a tremendous piece of marketing. It picks up on the cutting-edge digital imagery of the last twenty years – though only via current examples found on the internet - and repackages them for a mass web audience. In this sense, it's simply at the stage of commodification all art movements reach in the West: someone picks up on them when their time is ripe, names them and hence claims them, and 'monetizes' them.

So perhaps it's this matter of commodification that attracts the commentators. If you were interested in such themes and such art, you were already discussing them in the 90s, unless you were too young to do so, in which case it's bound to be terribly exciting and, for you, of course, new. Bruce Sterling definitely doesn't fall into the latter category.

That's interesting in itself, because even the mainstream art world has been doing the 'new aesthetic' for some years now; digital artists have been exploring glitch and machine vision for well over a decade, and contemporary figurative painters have been privately cataloguing instances of machine vision and glitch and reproducing them in oils with beautiful fidelity and nuance. That's a genuine movement beyond the mimicry of modernism that McKenzie Wark identifies with NA. So what is NA, and why doesn't it seem to know what's been going on in art for the last twenty years?

What we must have with the 'New Aesthetic' is a philistine movement that is ignorant of art, and aesthetics, and has no relevance to history. It's a Boorstinian 'pseudo-event': it's about imagery, and psychology as a marketing tool, and commodification. But it's not an aesthetic, and it displays nothing in common with what aesthetics are and what they are for. The images themselves are either 'found objects', or generated by 'artists' who are not artists but coders; they're exhibited or 'curated' by people with no knowledge of art or skill in it; and the images presented are vacuous, disposable, and empty of human intention or meaning or value. In other words, it's digital culture's punk moment – which is what's good about it, as well as what's bad.

Keeping with the notion of the interim, are contemporary manifestations of the physical in the virtual – and the virtual in the physical – designed to make us feel more comfortable – to pacify us that technology isn't infinitely correct (eg Glitch) or that there is something going on that isn't just magic (eg transparent device cases)? As connected technology becomes more prevalent to the point of ubiquity, does skeuomorphology have inherent self-obsolescence?

I'm not sure that glitch is a manifestation of the virtual in the physical, or vice versa; and I'm certain that transparent device cases are neither. The latter belong to the poststructuralist or postmodernist tradition of revealing or externalizing structure, aestheticizing it so as to emphasize function – like the Pompidou Centre in Paris, which originally colour-coded the duct-pipes according to their functions. This is function-as-style, and has nothing to do with reassuring anyone about the non-magical processes occurring within them.

But it does have something to do with the regressive tendency to depict the intestines and organs of a body as separate entities, reducible to component parts or functions. There isn't anything remotely magical about the component parts of a cellphone, or a laptop: they add up to the sum of their parts. Organisms don't seem to be so reducible, but our post-Röntgen desire to make visible the internal infects both the natural and the artificial, in what is a false analogy between the two.

This is where I see the pre-commodified punk populism of the New Aesthetic as a missed opportunity, as Ian Bogost does, though for different reasons. I'd like to see some critical awareness of the fact that an aesthetic is never neutral. For example, when a painter portrays a king and emphasizes the splendour of his robes, or the glamour of a woman's wardrobe, the aesthetic function is to communicate power and erotic allure respectively, by contrasting the aestheticized object with the ordinary. When art confers an aesthetic quality on anything, it simultaneously normalizes it, legitimizes it, and makes it an object of desire.

But the tendency of glitch, from 1970s scratch turntablism through 1980s stutter sampling to the 1990s glitch techno movement and now the New Aesthetic, has always been to confer an aesthetic quality upon something accidental, technologically-determined, and therefore fundamentally non-human. It's worth thinking about the social and psychological consequences of this increasing cultural tendency not just to normalize and legitimize but

to glamourize the non-human, because of the potential effect upon our perceptions of power. The natural human temptation, in dealing with this non-human aesthetic quality, is to anthropomorphize it – and I suspect your question about glitch 'pacifying us' is falling into that trap: *"Look, machines make mistakes too! They're like us!"*

The same approach was taken in the 1960s when biologists and art historians first began to study paintings made by apes. Primate paintings bear a resemblance to abstract art to the same degree that glitch resembles much Modernist art, but the study of apes' paintings was conducted in the hope of discovering a biological origin of the aesthetic sense. This approach was justified: humans and apes are after all both hominids. Conversely, technologically-produced glitch images can't tell us anything about human biology or evolution or the aesthetic sense, however much they bear a superficial resemblance to the kind of classically aesthetic disruptive mark upon a pictorial field that quintessentializes what we call 'art', because no-one is 'designing' these 'mistakes'. They're skeuomorphic systemic traits; they emerge as ornamental artefacts from a systemic malfunction. Indeed, I doubt if 'machine error' is even a useful concept. If there's any anthropomorphic analogy to be made, it's with the 'tragic flaw' of Greek drama: glitch is the hamartia of machines.

As technologies become more connected, it will in fact become ever more important for us to be able to distinguish between these non-human side-effects of technological evolution - such as skeuomorphs - and the intentional effects of human design. As 3D printing comes into ubiquity, we're likely to see an explosion of skeuomorphs, because it will become so much more common to see imitative objects 3D-printed in materials unsuited to their original functional forms. It's likely that Augmented Reality will also produce a profusion of imitative forms which copy the design of common artefacts, but which lose functionality in the transfer from one medium to another. The dead visual metaphors that are today being mistaken for skeuomorphs in the UI debate – such as floppy disk icons for the 'save' function – are at least easy to spot, because they're semiotic indexes: they're chosen by designers because they symbolize a function both via an historical connexion to that function, and via our habitual association that function with the object used as a symbol. But real skeuomorphs don't signify in that way; they don't advertise themselves as 'meaningful' forms, because evolution doesn't have any 'meaning' in the human sense. If we can't distinguish between design and evolution even today, as evidenced by most of the Apple skeuomorphism debate, then mixed reality is likely to muddy the waters even further, potentially producing a generation unable to distinguish between the numinous and the commonplace.

How much of an effect has JG Ballard had on your work and you personally, given your editorship of a collection of interviews with him? How/why is society becoming more Ballardian from your personal perspective?

A tremendous effect in some ways, particularly his cultural critique; and none whatsoever in other more academic respects... Certainly he was a major influence upon *Cyberpositive*, but I'd describe that book as neither academic nor fictional but somatic. Ballard's influence there was visual as much as conceptual; it had to do with the visionary power of *The Drowned World*. One can still read that novel and most of Ballard's earlier novels as delineating an accelerationist aesthetic, in the sense that they depict characters whose embrace of disaster is the only logical way to reconcile their own obscure psychic desires with cataclysmic change.

Extreme Metaphors for me personally is an attempt to understand the effect of Ballard on my own thought, so in a sense the book itself is my answer to your question. Ballard wrote many essays, two novels that were heavily fictionalized versions of periods of his life, and a memoir, besides his vast oeuvre of fiction. *Extreme Metaphors* tries to fill a gap in Ballard's work by taking the interview form as seriously as he did, putting key interviews in chronological order to produce a kind of (auto)biography of the development of his ideas over the last half-century. I felt it was important to do that because Ballard's wonderfully accessible in interview in a way that his fiction very often is not, the latter frequently being densely poetic, structurally challenging, or gnomically abstract. There's a kind of writing that has always been about the virtual, in the philosophical sense – that is, not about the future but about the abstract and the inchoate potentialities of the present – and Ballard's fiction clearly belongs to this tradition. It's not necessarily a science fiction tradition – one can read both Leibniz's *Monadology* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as belonging to it – but its abstract qualities do demand of the reader both a critical sensivity to allegory and a philosophical receptivity to the transcendent. Without both faculties in play in the act of reading, Ballard's fiction does end up appearing to be 'Ballardian' as the Collins English Dictionary defines it – *"suggestive*

of [...] dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments." But Ballard was a good deal less dystopian and good deal more pragmatic about the potentially dangerous effects of technology than that description of his fictions avers; in fact, whilst never blind to the hazards of technological change, he always looked optimistically upon our ability to adapt. *Extreme Metaphors* is a way of bringing this unsentimentally critical yet pragmatic Ballard into view for a wider readership.

If society is becoming more Ballardian, it's only because Ballard observed a metatendency of social engineering, architecture, technology, marketing and politics to merge in a schizophrenizing assault upon the human, and then extrapolated from this metatendency to its logical extremes in his fictions. It's difficult to read the interviews in *Extreme Metaphors* and not recognize in Ballard's prognoses the 'soft fascism' of the society we live in today. Democracy as an inconveniently populist system to be 'gamed', manipulated and navigated by means of technology and psychological influence via the media; politics as a branch of advertising; journalism as a staged performance of revelation and audience reaction; neuroleptic consumerism as the principal occupation of our leisure time; and a vast emigration away from the social, from community and work, towards an isolated internal space of mediated narcissism. 'Social media' are precisely about this – far from being about 'sharing', they promote the performance of ersatz multiple personalities – but then maybe that's still a viable, albeit schizophrenic, way to cope with the stylized fictions that comprise our experience of the communications landscape. It's exactly this kind of question that Ballard dealt with in his fictions: should we retreat from these psychopathologies? Or should we immerse ourselves in them, accelerate them to breaking point?

Further informaton on Dan O'Hara is available at his website, and he is @skeuomorphology on Twitter.

"Extreme Metaphors: Selected interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967-2008", co-edited by Dan O'Hara, is available now, published by Fourth Estate.

Post

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

back to top

Web Curios

Our weekly digest of the best and worst of digital and contemporary culture... delivered every Friday

Random article

Stefanie Posavec: artists and data

Bricolage: choice cuts from around the web

- Why TED is a massive, money-soaked orgy of self-congratulatory futurism

- In praise of fake reviews
- The making of the world's scariest terrorist brand
- Marketing agencies have completely missed the potential of digital
- Richard Prince sucks
-

@Imperica

@aliciakan thank you Alicia; that's very kind.
reply • retweet • favorite
RT @Matt_Muir: I'm off to a wedding this afternoon. If you're not, you could do worse than read Web Curios: http://t.co/XA5vjbWTBa
reply • retweet • favorite
Why TED is a massive, money-soaked orgy of self-congratulatory futurism
http://t.co/wW558bvCVG #bricolage
reply • retweet • favorite

Top

RSS. Terms / privacy / cookies. Creative Commons BY-NC-ND. © 2010-2014 Perini Networks Europe Ltd.